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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTANIS BREAK DOWN DOORS TO GET INTO U.S. FILM FESTIVAL

1. Summary: Embassy Almaty's first American film festival in November, featuring five films from U.S. producer Michael Fitzgerald, was widely viewed as the cultural event of the season, with audience attendance exceeding expectations. Combining the film screenings with a program of master classes and meetings with local filmmakers produced some tangible benefits as well, including the likely production this year in Kazakhstan of Fitzgerald's next film. This program, advancing the MPP goal of mutual understanding, showed once again how film can serve as a powerful tool of public diplomacy, changing perceptions of people and countries. End summary.

2. Eager to see non-commercial American films, throngs of Kazakhstani filmgoers last fall broke the hinge of an auditorium door while cramming to get into one of the five films shown during the November 2005 "Herald Fitzgerald!" film festival organized by the U.S. embassy Public Affairs Section. The week-long festival-offering a retrospective of the films of American producer Michael Fitzgerald and a series of master classes led by the producer himself-was the Almaty cultural event of the season. Whether they were students in jeans or VIPs bedecked in jewels and furs, many of the filmgoers expressed their deep appreciation of the event; some said it was "the best thing the American embassy has ever done here."

America Seen Anew

3. The program was exceptional because through the personality of producer Michael Fitzgerald and his representation of the contemporary American film world, Kazakhstani audiences developed a new respect for and interest in not only American film but also American culture in general. This program showed once again that film can serve as a powerful tool of public diplomacy, changing perceptions of people and countries.

4. The festival, giving Kazakhstani audiences a view of films not widely seen in the commercial market, began with a sneak preview of Fitzgerald's "The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada," a Cannes award-winning film that had not yet been shown in the United States. After the screening of each of the five films, Fitzgerald chatted with the audience, often discussing themes universal to both Americans and Kazakhstanis. During one of these discussions, an audience member said, "I had no idea that America produced serious films." With respect to "The Three Burials," Kazakhstanis easily grasped the film's themes of atomization and self-involvement in American society, seeing these as aspects of a culture striving to be free-and perhaps too free if that striving includes being free of family and community ties and a sense of obligation to others. One person during the discussion noted that although some of the portrayals of American society were negative, only an open society willing to take a critical look at itself could make such a film.

5. While Fitzgerald conducted master classes during the day, the students with whom he met spread the word about the festival, as did those who were coming to the screenings, so the size of the audiences grew successively throughout the event. Based on the Flannery O'Connor novel, Fitzgerald's film "Wiseblood" evoked words like "amazing" and "wonderful." "Under the Volcano," "Mr. Johnson," and the festival's final film, "The Pledge" all were departures from blockbuster movies, and fine examples of how the medium can be used to make us think about the world we have created. It was at the showing of the festival's last film, "The Pledge," that a crush of patrons gathered outside the doors leading into the auditorium. Although a theater manager was valiantly attempting to control the numbers of persons who got through, the crowd actually took the hinges off one of the doors. An embassy officer counting seats at the front of the house ran back and forth between the door and the seating to tell the manager that there was still room for 50 more persons. In the end, almost everyone got a seat.

Fitzgerald's Visit Boosts Kazakhstani Filmmaking

6. Fitzgerald was a charming person who, during master classes at the Academy of Arts, regaled both film students

and the big players in Kazakhstani independent film with tales of serious filmmaking in a commerce-driven world. Word traveled quickly in Kazakhstan's artistic community, and, just as the film audiences grew, so, too, did Fitzgerald's three-hour master classes, each one drawing more and more local film experts. (When Fitzgerald left Kazakhstan, he took scripts of many Kazakhstani film students and promised to read them and provide comments.)

17. An important part of the program was devoted also to informal meetings with Kazakhstani film specialists. As Kazakhstan is currently experiencing a rebirth of independent, small-budget films, this showcase of American independent films and discussions provided an excellent opportunity to support the revitalization of the Kazakhstani film industry.

18. A further, serendipitous result of Fitzgerald's presence was his desire to enhance a grant from the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation to Kazakhstan's Central State Archive for Film Preservation. In addition to the funds, the grant is providing to the archive, Fitzgerald offered to put the archive director in touch with philanthropist David Packard to assist in the director's pursuit of a \$1 million TeleCinema machine to preserve film for all of Central Asia.

19. Fitzgerald was assisted ably during the master classes and other meetings by local film director and producer Ermek Shirnabayev, who translated, interpreted, and escorted Fitzgerald everywhere, including to meetings with potential film backers. Shirnabayev, with his boundless energy, turned out to be a great match for our cultural envoy. We understand that Fitzgerald has been offered financial support from Kazakhstani sources and, therefore, plans to make his next film in Kazakhstan. Based on the novel, "Waiting for the Barbarians" by South African writer J.M. Coetzee, the film venture will engender U.S.-Kazakhstani cooperation, and no doubt Shirnabayev will play a role in making this project come about.

Security - A Little Bubbly Took the Edge Off

10. Due to concerns about possible pirating of our sneak preview film, "The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada," the screening was planned as a by-invitation-only event replete with bag searches and magnetometer. Being prepared for the usual 40-50 percent of the guests to show up, we were taken aback as we ferried invitations around town: almost everyone presented with an invitation expressed a firm intention of coming. We were worried for a time that our guests would outnumber the seats. (Fortunately, they did not.) Prepared also for unhappiness on the part of our VIPs due to the necessity of putting them through security procedures, we ushered them from the magnetometer into the lobby for champagne and chocolate before the film.

11. In the name of security, we also made our guests give up their prized cell phones. Even though we advised them well in advance that cell phones would not be permitted in the auditorium, about 340 of 350 guests brought them anyway. We had anticipated this and engaged GSO to build cubbyhole shelving that we numbered, giving guests a correspondingly numbered ticket for their phones. The only blemish on the evening, therefore, was when one guest lost her numbered ticket, someone else found it, and then claimed the owner's phone.

12. There were assorted glitches and lessons learned in spite of myriad count down meetings, creation of individual festival schedules for the entire PAS staff, and sedulous planning with the RSO. "Wise Blood," for example, suddenly turned into "Mister Johnson" about a third of the way through. Theater staff mixed up the reels, so we had to show "Wise Blood" in its entirety the next morning. A delay in showing "The Pledge" occurred because the projectionists had put the film on the platters upside down. The problem was remedied pretty quickly. Nonetheless, we and the Kazakhstanis were enormously pleased, our guests asking when the next film festival would take place. . . .

13. GPRA Reporting Information

--Date, Fiscal Year, and Quarter: October 29-November 5, 2005 (1st quarter, FY 06).

--Justification and Objective: to introduce Kazakhstani audiences to independent American films. Kazakhstani audiences have almost no exposure to high-quality contemporary American films. The only U.S. films shown in Kazakhstan are blockbuster and "B" films. The Fitzgerald film festival thus filled a gap for Kazakhstani artists and citizens at large.

--MPP Strategic Goal and Audience Reached: this program addressed the MPP goal of "Mutual Understanding" with

respect to U.S. society and values. One of the film viewers noted that it was very "American" for the U.S. government to sponsor a festival that included films that did not always show U.S. government officials in a positive light.

--The target audience for the program was diverse-young filmmakers, film critics, faculty, independent filmmakers, producers, students of the Academy of Arts, alumni of USG programs, and the general public.

--Results: see paras 1-12.

--Non-USG sources of in-country funding/in-kind support: space at the Academy of Arts to hold master classes.

--Quality of U.S. Support and IIP Offices Involved: Outstanding. This was a very complicated event with the handling of the "The Three Burials" film. We express our gratitude to ECA/PE/C/CU Susan Cohen for her efforts in finding Michael Fitzgerald and for her administrative and moral support, without which the festival would not have been possible.
ASQUINO